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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that one basis for age discrimination involves stereotypes about older people. Situational variables, however, may influence the extent to which these stereotypes affect decisions in employment. One situational variable, the age composition of the applicant pool, was varied to determine the degree to which age bias in decisions can be reduced. Graduate students (N=154) were asked to evaluate an applicant for a specific organizational position. In order to obtain a sense of the broader applicant pool, subjects read eight applications, evaluating only the eighth who was always a male aged 60-61 years. The other seven applicants varied in age (27-28 years, 60-61 years) depending upon the experimental condition. For the four conditions, the percentage of older applicants were: 25 percent, 37.5 percent, 50 percent or 100 percent. The results of the applicant evaluations revealed that as the number of older applicants in the applicant pool increased, an older applicant seeking employment in a stereotypically younger person job received more favorable ratings. In addition, as the number of older applicants in the pool increased, there was a shift in the perception of the job. These findings provide some support for the notion that less favorable decisions regarding the older applicant might be reduced by manipulating contextual factors, suggesting a strategy that organizations might pursue to avoid or reduce age bias in decisions at work. (NRB)

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Applicant Pool Composition and Job Perceptions: Impact on Decisions Regarding an Older Applicant

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that one basis for age discrimination involves the stereotypes we hold about older people. However, situational factors may influence the extent to which these stereotypes affect our decisions. In the present study, one situational factor, the age composition of the applicant pool, was varied to determine the degree to which age bias in decisions can be reduced. It was hypothesized that as the number of older applicants in an applicant pool increases, an older applicant seeking employment in a stereotypically younger person job would receive more favorable ratings. Further, it was hypothesized as the number of older applicants in the pool increased, there would be a shift in the perception of the job. The results of the analyses of variance supported both hypotheses. Implications for further research on bias in decisions and for organizational recruitment strategies are discussed.

Applicant Pool Composition and Job Perceptions:

Impact on Decisions Regarding an Older Applicant

The composition of the American workforce is changing. Specifically, the distribution of age in our workforce is shifting toward more older workers. Therefore, the attitudes and decisions regarding older workers are becoming an increasing concern for Industrial/Organizational psychologists and for industry. In particular, there is concern about the possibility of unfair age discrimination in industry, prompted by the fact that older workers appear to encounter a variety of problems in the workplace (Arvey & Mussio, 1973; Barrett, Mihal, Panek, Sterns, & Alexander, 1977; Haefner, 1977).

Social psychological research suggests that one basis for unfair discrimination is the widely shared beliefs and attitudes (stereotypes) that we hold about members of particular age groups (Rosen & Jerdee, 1976a & b; Sherif & Sherif, 1969). Group membership, however, is only one type of information which potentially could affect personnel decisions. Stereotypes appear to play a greater role in some situations than others. Situational factors therefore may determine the extent to which stereotypes influence decisions about individuals. Specifically, situational factors such as job characteristics, composition of the applicant pool, workgroup composition, etc., may affect whether an older person is evaluated as a member of a group which suffers from discrimination due to age or as an individual in his/her own right (Heilman, 1980; 1983). In the present study, one such situational factor, the age composition of the applicant

pool, was manipulated to determine its effect on simulated selection decisions concerning an older applicant.

Perceived Incongruity between Person/Job Characteristics and Decisions Bias

Heilman (1983) has proposed a "Lack of Fit" model which describes the dynamics of gender bias and the conditions which are conducive to its occurrence in the industrial setting. The model may be useful in providing a framework for understanding possible occupational age discrimination. Heilman proposes that decision-makers' expectations about an individual's success in a particular job are determined by the perceived fit of the individual's attributes and the duties of the job. For example, if an individual is perceived to be low on motor skills, and high on interpersonal and verbal skills, one would not expect the individual to perform well on a job which required extensive motor skills. In this case, there would be a perceived poor fit between the individual's characteristics and the requirements of the job. On the other hand, the same individual would be expected to be successful when the job is thought to require high levels of interpersonal skills and verbal ability. Thus, the perception of a good fit or congruity gives rise to expectations of success while perceptions of incongruity give rise to expectations of failure.

Applying this rational to gender bias in the workplace, Heilman (1983) suggested that the demands of masculinely sex-typed positions, such as managerial jobs, are perceived as incongruent with the attributes stereotypically associated with women as a group. Therefore, if a

stereotypic view of women is held in a situation where a woman was under consideration for a managerial position, the expectation would be toward failure and negative personnel decisions (Cohen & Bunker, 1975).

The Lack of Fit model is based upon two assumptions: one, there are stereotypic characteristics associated with groups of individuals (for example, men and women, younger and older people, blacks and whites, etc.); and two, there are stereotypic or generally accepted characteristics associated with a given task or job. In order to apply the model to the issue of age bias in decisions, the existence of an older worker stereotype must be documented. In addition, tasks or jobs must be shown to have age-related characteristics associated with them.

Negative Stereotype of the Older Worker

During the last 15 years, the process of growing old in our society has received much attention. In 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) formally recognized what has come to be called "the older worker problem." The evidence which documents the problem indicates that once unemployed, older workers have more difficulty than younger workers in finding jobs (Axelbank, 1972), have reduced upward mobility and once re-employed, often take paycuts (Sheppard, 1970). There is also evidence of recruitment discrimination into training programs (Sheppard, 1970), hiring discrimination, and selection test bias against the older worker (Arvey & Mussio, 1973; Barrett, Mihal, Panek, Sterns, & Alexander, 1977: Haefner, 1977). Individuals from 45 to 55 years and older appear to encounter more negative experiences in the workplace than their younger counterparts.

Although there are changes in behaviors and performance associated with increasing age, the gerontological literature indicates that chronological age is not an accurate predictor of individual performance on specific tasks or jobs (Heron & Chown, 1966; Maddox & Douglas, 1974; Murrell, 1970; Whitfield, 1954). However, the problems that older workers encounter in the work setting suggest that a worker's age does affect perceptions of performance, and, consequently, has a negative effect on personnel decisions.

It appears that the belief that performance declines substantially with increasing age is largely unsupported (Baltes & Schaie, 1974). Such beliefs which are largely inaccurate about individual members of a particular group are called stereotypes (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). It is possible that a negative age stereotype exists about older workers, and that these widely shared beliefs influence decisons that we make at work.

The negative stereotype of the older worker has been documented in the industrial gerontology literature and in the industrial/organizational psychology literature (Brubaker & Powers, 1976; Kogan & Shelton, 1962; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976a; Youmans, 1971). Older people are viewed as more passive, reserved, obsolete, and inflexible than younger workers (Rosen and Jerdee, 1976a; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969). In addition, this negative stereotype appears to influence personnel decisions (Rosen and Jerdee, 1976b). Fewer positive corrective measures were suggested for older workers. They were not suggested for promotions into creative or innovative jobs, and they were less likely to be recommended for training or retraining than younger workers.

In the work setting, Cleveland and Landy (1981) found that chronological age of the employee has a small but differential impact upon the ratings given to employees in certain performance areas. The importance of these performance areas varied from job to job suggesting that the degree of bias may depend upon the type of job under consideration. Chronological age may be a more salient factor in some organizational positions than in other positions.

The Age-Type of Task and Jobs

Although much attention has been given to employee or personal characteristics, there has been far less research on the situational characteristics that influence decisions. Recently, however, Cleveland and Landy (1982) hypothesized that some jobs have more salient age-related characterisitcs than other positions. They asked managers to describe jobs in terms of the perceived distribution of incumbent ages. The results indicated that individuals can describe jobs according to their age characteristics and the same jobs are viewed as typically held by a younger person, an older person or a person of any age.

Both jobs and groups of individuals then appear to have age-related stereotypes or characterisitics associated with them. According to the Lack of Fit model (Heilman, 1983), the most pronounced perceived incongruity will occur in organizational positions where the typical job-holder is either a younger person or usually an older person (i.e., a younger person job - Intermediate Programmer; older person job - Plant Manager). Recently, Cleveland and Landy (1983) found that when there is an incongruity between the age of the individual and the age-type of the job,

more negative decisions are made about the individual. "Older" individuals received less award money and were promoted less quickly than "younger" people in a stereotypically younger person job (Intermediate Programmer). Cleveland and Landy also found that managers gave lower overall performance ratings to individuals whose age characteristics did not "match" the age stereotype of the job.

Reducing the Perceived Person/Job Incongruity - Present Research

These research findings indicate that more negative decisions are made when stereotypes of individuals do not match or fit the stereotype of the job. This suggests that if the perceived incongruity can be reduced or eliminated, less negative decisions might result. How can we affect this perceived lack of fit? There are two general approaches that we can pursue in attempting to reduce the person/situation incongruity. First, we might try to alter or change stereotypes associated with the older workers in such a way that incongruity is reduced. However, changing stereotypes about groups of people involves changing a deeply rooted belief system which is widely shared by individuals. Altering these beliefs is no simple task (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). Or second, we might change the beliefs or sterotypes associated with the job. By manipulating various contextual factors to reduce incongruity, the negative influence of a belief system on decisions regarding older workers may be reduced.

The purpose of the present study was to manipulate one such contextual factor, the composition of an applicant pool, to determine the extent to which negative decisions regarding an older applicant can be reduced. It is hypothesized that as the number of older individuals in an applicant

pool increases, the evaluation of an older applicant will become more favorable. The rationale is that the perceived person/job incongruity can be reduced by manipulating the age stereotype of the job while keeping the stereotype of the individual intact. It is reasoned that as the number of older applicants in the pool changes, the inferences concerning the stereotype of the job will vary. For example, when the number of older applicants is high, subjects will rate the age-type of the job as "older" than in conditions where the number of older applicants is low.

Method

Subjects and Design

One hundred fifty-four male and female part-time evening graduate students participated in the study. Eighty-three percent were currently employed, with 65% working full-time and 18% working part-time. Fifty-seven percent of the group indicated supervisory experience involving selection decisions. The median subject age was 28 years with ages ranging from 21 to 59 years.

The experiment was a four group between subjects design with the age composition of the applicant pool as the independent variable.

Procedure

Using a procedure similar to tht employed by Heilman (1980), subjects were informed that the research was concerned with personnel decision-making. They were instructed to evaluate an applicant for specific organizational position (Intermediate Programmer). In an earlier study (Cleveland & Landy, 1982) the job of Intermediate Programmer had been classified as a position typically held by a younger person (below 40

years). In order to obtain a sense of the broader applicant pool, subjects were asked to review a total of eight applications. Only one applicant (the eighth) would be evaluated. Subjects were told that all applicants had been prescreened for acceptability in educational and background qualifications. The applications were similar to those used in previous research on occupational sex bias (Heilman, 1980).

Subjects received packets containing copies of standard employment application forms. Each form was completed in a different handwriting and contained information about academic background, interests outside of work and programming experience. The hypothetical applicants were portrayed as male graduates from large midwestern schools, had work experience parallel in type and duration, and had similar outside work and athletic interests (see Heilman, 1980).

The position that the applicants were to be considered for was that of Intermediate Programmer employed in a technically-oriented organization. The abilities necessary to perform the job were described as follows:

> ...The ability to analyze moderately complex programs, code moderately complex programs; prepare test data; test and debug programs; perform maintenance work such as coding changes in appropriate languages; deal with production problems; prepare documentation for all completed work.

Of the eight applications reviewed, only the last one was designated as the one to be evaluated. It was followed be a brief questionnaire containing the dependent measures. After responding to the questions, the packets were collected and the subjects were debriefed.

Manipulation of the Age Composition of the Applicant Pool

The dates of the high school and college graduation and the date of applicant birth established the age of the applicant. These items were prominently placed and enclosed for emphasis (Heilman, 1980). Subjects were asked to evaluate the eighth applicant who was always older (60 or 61 years) and male. The other seven applicants varied in age (27 or 28 years or 60 or 61 years) depending upon the experimental conditions. There were four experimental conditions; two out of eight older applicants; three out of eight older applicants; four out of eight older applicants, or eight out of eight older applicants. Therefore, the percentage of older men in the applicant pool was 25%, 37.5%, 50%, or 100% respectively.

To avoid confounding of the stimulus materials with the experimental effects, two parallel sets of each of the eight applications were created--one older applicant set and one younger applicant set. The single older person application form that subjects evaluated (the focal applicant) was varied within each of the experimental conditions so that our findings would be the result of the age composition and not particular to a specific set of descriptive information. Except in the 100% older applicant condition where all 8 older applicants were used, the other seven applicants were randomly selected from the sets of younger and older applications depending upon the age composition manipulation. These seven applications were randomly ordered.

Dependent Measures

In order to evaluate the focal applicant, subjects were asked to respond to four questions using a 9-point rating scale. The dependent

measures were 1) How likely would you be to recommend hiring this applicant? (Very unlikely to recommend to very likely to recommend; 2) How much potential would you say this applicant has for advancement in the company (very little potential to very much potential); 3) All in all, how qualified do you think this applicant is for the position? (very unqualified to very qualified); 4) How would you expect this applicant to perform on the job? (very unsuccessful to very successful). In addition, ratings were obtained using seven 9-point bipolar adjective scales. These adjective scales were used to determine whether differential stereotyping of the older applicant occurred across the four experimental conditions. Furthermore, subjects' perceptions of the age stereotype of the job were obtained by a rating on a 9-point scale. A rating of "1" indicated a very young person job, while a rating of "9" reflected a very old job.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted using the four sets of subject's responses to the dependent variables. A significant MANOVA was found indicating a significant relationship between the experimental conditions and the four dependent variables (F = 2.05, df = 12,434, p < .02). Separate analyses of variance were performed using each of the subjects' four personnel ratings. Individual cell means were conpared using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) method for multiple comparisons.

Ratings of recommendation-to-hire. A significant main effect for Age Composition was found using the hiring recommendation ratings (F = 15.08, df = 3,153, p < .01). Using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) procedure, significant differences in mean ratings occurred between the 25%

and the 100% conditions and the 37.5% and 100% conditions. There were no significant differences in mean hiring ratings among the 25%, 37.5% and the 50% conditions or the 50% and 100% conditions. The hiring recommendations for older applicants in the 25% condition were systemmatically lower than in the 100% condition.

Ratings of potential to advance. A similar pattern was revealed in the analysis of variance using the ratings of potential to advance. The main effect for Age Compositon was again significant (F = 12.66, df = 3, p < .03). Using the LSD procedures, there were significant differences in mean ratings between the 25% and the 100% conditions and the 50% and 100% condition. Similar to the results using the hiring recommendation, lower ratings were given to the older applicant in the condition with fewer older applicants. In addition, no differences in mean ratings were found among the 25%, 37.5% and 50% conditions or the 37.5%, 100% conditions.

Ratings of qualification. No significant main effect for Age Composition was found in the analysis of the qualification ratings (F = 1.99, df = 3,150, p < .12). Regardless of the proportion of older applicants in the applicant pool, the older focal person was given similar qualification ratings for the position of Intermediate Programmer.

Ratings of job performance. Similar to the qualification ratings, no significant main effect was found for Age Compositions the ratings of expected job performance (F = 1.13, df = 3,150, p < .34). That is, the older focal person was expected to perform successfully in the job of Intermediate Programmer regardless of the number of older applicants in the application pool.

Age Type of the Occupation

The specific occupational title used in this study was classified in an earlier study (Cleveland & Landy, 1982) as a stereotypically younger person job. Indeed, in the present study, the job received an overall mean of 3.46 with a standard deviation of 1.62 using a 9-point rating scale indicating a generally younger person job. However, when the age stereotype of the job was examined by experimental condition, significant differences emerged ($F = 18.12$, $df = 3,145$, $p < .001$). The LSD comparisons showed significant differences in ratings of the perceived age-type of Intermediate Programmer between conditions involving 2 of 8 older applicants and 8 of 8 older applicants and between conditions involving 3 of 8 older applicants and 8 of 8 older applicants. The cell means depicted in Table 2 indicated that as the number of older applicants in an applicant pool increases, the perceptions of the age-type of the job shifted from a younger person job ($X = 2.80$ and 2.90) to a middle-aged position ($X = 4.33$).

Insert Table 2 about here

Covarying Job Stereotype Ratings and Personnel Decisons

Although the age composition of the applicant pool influenced the extent to which the job of Intermediate Programmer was viewed as a stereotypically younger or older occupation, it does not verify that this in turn influenced the two personnel decisions. Therefore, analyses of covariance were performed on the hiring ratings and the ratings of

potential to advance using the age type of the job as the covariate. The results indicated that when the age-type of the job was held constant, no age composition main effect was found to be significant at the $p < .05$ level for either the hiring recommendation or the ratings of advancement potential.

Adjective Ratings of the Older Applicant

In the present study, it was hypothesized that the perceived incongruity between person and job characteristics could be reduced by altering the perceptions of the job while keeping deeply rooted beliefs (stereotype) concerning older people unchanged. Therefore, in order to assess the age-related stereotypes of the individual, ratings of the focal applicant were obtained along seven adjective dimensions found to be associated with perceptions of older and younger people (Brubaker & Power, 1976; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976a; Cleveland & Landy, 1981). The seven dimensions were: active-passive; productive-unproductive; old-fashioned-progressive; bold-cautious; creative-uncreative; trainable-untrainable; and motivated-unmotivated. These seven scales were selected to provide a unitary view of the focal applicant with respect to age stereotypes. Since the adjectives were highly intercorrelated (coefficient Alpha = .70), one score was derived from the sum of each subject's ratings on the seven scales.

Analysis of variance of the composite scores indicated no significant Age Composition main effect (F = n.s.). The perception of the focal applicant did not differ significantly across the four conditions. Therefore, although the perceptions of the job varied depending upon the

age composition of the applicant pool, the stereotype of the individual remained unchanged.

Discussion

The results of the experiment demonstrate that for a younger job, the proportion of older workers in an applicant pool can have an effect on some personnel decisions regarding older applicants. Consistent with earlier research on sex bias (Heilman, 1980) an older applicant was in far more negative a position for employment when the proportion of older applicant was in the 25% level than when it was at the 100% level. In the near token situation, the older person was rated as less hirable for the programmer position and was rated lower in advancement potential. However, older applicants were rated similarly in qualifications and in expected performance in the job regardless of the proportion of older individuals in the applicant pool. Although consistent with Heilman's results concerning occupational gender bias, the results of the present study suggest that the magnitude of age bias is less than that of sex bias. In the present study, it appears that the representation of older applicants in an applicant pool may affect some personnel (hiring recommendation and advancement potential) and yet not others (qualification ratings and expected job performance).

One possible reason that the presence of more older applicants resulted in more favorable decisions may be that the perception of the age type of the job varied with the composition of the applicant pool. That is, by manipulating a contextual variable, the inferences about the age type of the job appeared to undergo modification. In the conditions where there were near token older applicants (2 of 8 and 3 of 8), the job

was rated as clearly a young person position (X = 2.3 and 2.4 respectively on a 9-point rating scale). Whereas, the same job title was rated as significantly "older" (X = 4.0) when the proportion of older applicants was high. In an earlier study, Cleveland and Landy (1982) found using two separate questionnaires that managers classified the job title Intermediate Programmer as a younger job. In the present study, it appears that the perceptions of the job were altered at least temporarily. It is not clear whether these effects would endure overtime. We assert that they probably would not.

The findings also provide support for the process underlying the Heilman (1983) Lack of Fit model of occupational bias. The model suggests that expectations about an individual's success in a particular job or task and consequent personnel decisions may be determined by the fit between the person's attributes and the characteristics of the job. This implies two possible approaches for reducing the perceived person/job incongruity. First, we might try to alter the stereotypes associated with the older workers as a group in such a way to reduce incongruity. Second, we might attempt to alter the decision-maker's beliefs or inferences associated with the job. The purpose of the present study was to attempt to modify age-related characteristics of a specific job in order to reduce a perceived person/job incongruity. Indeed, the results suggest that by manipulating the age composition of the applicant pool, the perception of the job can be altered at least temporarily, and this modification appears to have some impact on two personnel decisions concerning older applicants. It does not appear that the decision-maker's stereotype of the older

applicant was altered. The adjective rating describing the focal older applicant did not significantly differ across the four experimental conditions. One possible interpretation is that the manipulation of a contextual variable may modify the perception of a job at least temporarily while the decision-maker's perception or stereotype of the older person remains intact. This interpretation should be made with caution, however. An alternative interpretation for the non-significant adjective ratings is that inappropriate adjectives were used to depict the stereotype of older people/workers and, therefore, differences across conditions were not detected. More likely age stereotypes may be more difficult to depict or less recognizable than are sex stereotypes (Heilman, 1980).

The present study represents a point of departure for future research on the relationship between personal characteristics and work decisions. This study considered applicants applying for a position typically held by a younger person. Future research should investigate whether a similar discriminatory effect occurs when a younger person applies for a job typically held by an older person. The dependent measures in the present study were also limited to one operationalization--an absolute rating of one (older) applicant. In order to more fully understand the effects of the age composition of an applicant pool upon decisions, different types of decision situations should be simulated and examined. For example, rather than rate one applicant (older), subjects could rate more than one applicant (whose ages varied) or rank applicants. In addition, the present study focused upon one content area of personnel decisions (selection-related decisions). It would be useful to determine the

generalizability of our findings to other personnel decisions such as transfer and workgroup placement decisions. Last, in order to assess the external validity of our findings, the experiment should be replicated using actual decision-makers in industry. It is conceivable that part-time graduate students hold significantly different stereotypes regarding individuals and jobs than managers in industry. The age composition of the applicant pool may not affect judgments made by actual decision-makers in the same manner as in the student population. Currently, the first author is collecting data from a large group of professionals and practitioners who are employed full-time in industry in order to assess the external validity of our present findings.

If continued research in this area yields similar results, than the findings in the present study have implications for industry. The findings provide some support for the notion that less favorable decisions regarding the older applicant might be reduced by manipulating contextual factors. This suggests a strategy that organizations might pursue in order to avoid or possible reduce age-related bias in decisions at work. First, the organization should identify those occupations that are stereotypically or typically held by younger people. Cleveland and Landy (1982) found that managers appear to be able to classify some jobs consistently according to their perceived age characteristics using two separate questionnaire formats. Next, recruit more older people to apply for those positions where the proportion of older individuals or applicants is low. By increasing the proportion of older applicants for these jobs, we may be able to reduce the perceived person/job incongruity by altering

perceptions of the job, and thereby, reduce unfavorable decisions concerning the older individual.

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Author Notes

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Table 1

Mean Personnel Decision Ratings in Each Experimental Condition

	Proportion of Older Applicants			
	2/8 (25%)	3/8 (37.5%)	4/8 (50%)	8/8 (100%)
Recommend for Hire	4.58	4.61	5.35	5.85
	(38)	(38)	(37)	(41)
Potential to Advance	3.45	3.97	3.65	4.73
	(38)	(37)	(37)	(41)
Qualified	6.16	6.05	6.81	6.81
	(38)	(38)	(37)	(41)
Job Performance	6.08	6.34	6.73	6.39
	(38)	(38)	(37)	(41)

Note: The higher the score the more favorable the rating (9-point rating scale).

Table 2

Mean Job Ratings in Each Experimental Condition

	Proportion of Older Applicants			
	2/8 (25%)	3/8 (37.5%)	4/8 (50%)	8/8 (100%)
Age Type of Job	2.84 (38)	2.97 (36)	3.66 (35)	4.33 (40)